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Gender and sexuality III: Precarious places

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Abstract
This progress report considers precarious geographies of genders and sexualities at a range of intersecting scales. In a time currently characterized as precarious, anxious and insecure, feminist and queer geographers are well placed to examine vulnerable geographies – including their own – of bodies, lives and labours. The review considers the ways precarity operates as a concept, condition and experience by first asking what and where is precarity? Second, a recurring theme throughout feminist and queer precarious geographical literature is the importance of foregrounding relationality, the multiscalar, and marginalized bodies. Ultimately, what it means to feel 'secure' shifts and changes across places, genders and sexualities.

Keywords
bodies, disasters, employment, genders, (in)securities, migrants, precarity, refugees, sexualities, vulnerabilities

I Introduction

As I was preparing this progress report, I was reminded of the patron saint of precarious workers – San Precario – who was invented by the Chainworkers Crew (a group of self-organised workers) and which first appeared in Milan on 29 February 2004 (Tarì and Vanni, 2005). Since then, San Precario has proliferated, has numerous guises and genders, and occasionally performs miracles. Statues of San Precario may be found in humble spaces such as suburban supermarkets through to the extravagant spaces of Venice film festivals. The saint also appears in the form of small 'holy prayer cards' (Mattoni and Doerr, 2007). This patron saint of precarious workers and lives has been adopted by many (mostly in European countries, but also beyond) to perform community activism by participating in public rallies, demonstrations, marches, and interventions. I mention this saint because it illustrates some of the variety of what precarity means – as a concept, a condition, and an experience across place and space (Millar, 2017). I'm particularly enamoured by the saint's ability to support activism (I wrote about activism in my last progress report), and to be genderqueer (the topic of my first progress report). And while I am not at all 'saintly', I have and do experience what precarity does. All of which prompts me to consider the relationship between gender, sexuality, percarity, place and space in my final progress report.

Precarity – as a concept, condition and experience – is currently being considered in migrant

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labour geographies (Lewis et al., 2016; Ettlinger, 2007; Waite, 2009), population geographies (Tyner, 2016), critical geographies (Waite, 2009), squatting geographies (Datta, 2012; Ferreri et al., 2017; Vasudevan, 2015), geopolitics (Woon, 2011, 2014), (in)secure body geographies (Philo, 2014), and sociology (Millar, 2017). Much of this work is primarily inspired by feminist poststructuralist Butler's (2004, 2009a, 2009b, 2011) writings on 'precarious lives'. In a virtual roundtable on 'precarity talk', Berlant, Butler, Cvejić, Lorey, Puar, and Vujanoić (Puar, 2012: 163) pose the question:

> Given the multiple meanings of 'precarity' in European and North American contexts, how might we sketch its variable deployment, not to pose a normative understanding of precarity, but to understand what precarity as a concept and as an ontological condition enables in both political and intellectual terms and across different institutional, governmental, inter/disciplinary, and bodily contexts?

Such a framing takes precarity beyond the usual examinations of waged labour (and its central place within economic, social and moral geographies). Rather, by adopting and stretching concepts of precarity, precariousness, insecurity and vulnerability, feminist and queer geographers are able to examine how genders and sexualities matter when faced with the fragmentation of societal bonds, social and political governance, senses of entitlement and feelings of belonging. Experiences of precarity must be placed within 'the situation of relationality itself, insofar as our dependencies are vulnerabilities' (Puar et al., 2012: 171).

The aim of this review, then, is to bring to the surface key debates by feminist and queer geographers on genders, sexualities, space, place and precarity. In other words, I ask: how are geographers paying attention to the concepts and conditions of precarity and precariousness (as well as the related terms of 'vulnerability' and 'insecurity') through close readings of gendered and sexed bodies and places?

I begin by providing definitions for the term 'precarity' and 'precarious'. Second, I review a range of feminist and queer 'precarious' geographical research published in recent years. Themes that emerge in this broad reading are: employment; geopolitics (migrants, refugees, asylum seekers); disasters; embodied ontological insecurities; health and wellbeing; and, geographies that destabilize genders and sexualities as the primary categories of analysis. This review documents the geographies of genders, sexualities and precarity with an aim to prompt awareness and reflection about the relationship between precarity, feminist and queer geographies.

II What and where is precarity?

The concept of precarity emerges from many literatures, yet there are three scholars that stand out: Butler (2004, 2009a, 2009b, 2011); Bourdieu (1998); and Standing (2011). Both Bourdieu (1998) and Standing (2011) place labour at the centre of their analysis, and Butler (2004) pushes the concept to mean a general condition of human lives. Because of this, and in recognition of her feminist ethics, I focus solely on Butler. In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Butler (2004) claims that all humans are vulnerable because of the social condition of life. Precariousness, as a generalized condition of life, is felt when humans are vulnerable, for example, through relationships that may be lost and when exposure to others comes with a risk of violence. Butler (2004: 31) understands precariousness to be about a 'common human vulnerability, one that emerges with life itself'. While all lives are vulnerable, some lives are deemed 'more grievable' (Butler, 2004: 30) than others creating the unequal spread of vulnerability across space, place and bodies depending on class,

race, gender, sexuality, nationality, age and ability, as well as other social distinctions.

Butler's (2004) focus on precarity does not come from the desire to condemn specific operations of global and contemporary capitalism. Rather, she approaches precariousness as a condition of social life with the aim of finding an ethical standpoint. Acts of violence committed by the military in the name of security (particularly in the aftermath of September 11, 2001) highlight the rapid desire for security. Butler suggests that staying with insecurity is more productive, viewing precarity as a resource rather than something to be quickly banished. She argues that staying insecure allows us to recognize the precariousness of others and has the potential to disrupt the self/other binary. Butler goes on to distinguish precarity and precariousness in her writings on vulnerability, with precarity referring to the specific ways socio-economic and political institutions create unequal life conditions for all, and relates precariousness to the idea that vulnerability is an unavoidable aspect of life (Butler, 2011; Puar, 2012). Here precarity means a condition or experience that goes beyond labour and is imposed on the 'poor, the disenfranchised and those endangered by war or natural disaster' (Watson, 2012: n.p.); detained non-citizens; and the incarcerated (Moran et al., 2017). Prior to this, precarity was a political platform for social movements in Europe, such as the EuroMayDay protests in the 2000s (Neilson and Rossiter, 2008). Precarity, and precariousness, then, is everywhere, particularly if it is imagined as part of a global 'security moment' (Goldstein, 2010), yet some bodies suffer more than others.

Hence, many geographers are questioning the validity of the terms precarity and precarious. Waite (2009) calls for a critical geography of precarity, identifying conditions such as insecurity, instability, lack of legal protection, and social and economic vulnerability. Waite (2009: 426) notes that precarious subjectivities are gendered (as well as constructed via class, race, ethnicity, age and so on), because 'precarity is lived very differently by workers in various contexts'. Puar et al. (2012: 170) insist that an examination of precarious bodies and experiences prompts a 'rethinking of social relationality', something that is at the core of geographers' relational poverty research (Elwood et al., 2016). In the next section I sketch out the extent to which feminist and queer geographers draw on concepts of precarity, precariousness, vulnerability and instability, showing which bodies 'do not qualify as recognizable, readable, or grievable' (Butler, 2009b: xiii).

III Precarious geographies of genders and sexualities

Feminist and queer geographers – particularly since the 2007–8 global financial crisis and onset of austerity programmes – have devoted attention to what precarity does to low paid labourers, including migrant labourers, as well as refugees and asylum-seekers. Much of this work highlights the uneven geographies of gender, class, age and nationality (Anderson, 2010; Dyer et al., 2011; Elwood et al. 2016; Laurie et al., 2015; Lewis et al., 2016; May et al., 2007; McDowell et al., 2007; McIlwaine and Bermudez, 2011; McIlwaine, 2010). For example, May et al. (2007) discuss the gendered spaces of migrant work, noting that women tend to work in 'semi-private' spaces of care and hotels, yet men occupy 'semi-public' spaces when office cleaning or working in the London Underground. The hyper-precarious lives of 'un-free' and exploited migrants (Lewis et al., 2016) highlight which bodies are not deemed to be full subjects of the state. The imperative, for feminist and queer geographers, is to examine the way gender and sexual norms condition 'what and who will be "legible"' and what and who will not. And in this way, precarity is a rubric that brings together 'women, queers,

transgender people, the poor, and the stateless' (Butler, 2009b: iii).

Rather than focusing on the paid and unpaid work of migrant women, Munt (2016) examines the sensory geographies of migrant women's Brighton Beach encounters. A hybrid subjectivity emerges at the beach when women from Sudan, Egypt, India, Pakistan, Iraq, Jordan, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Iran and Palestine encounter British racism, nudity and gay pride. In turn, they critically reflect on their journey of belonging and/or not belonging. In another article, Dyck and McLaren (2004) focus on the gendering of immigrant and refugee settlement experiences through the accounts of women and their daughters in Canada. Expressions of emotions and accounts of stress are vital parts of their settlement stories. Martin (2011) applies a feminist geopolitical framework of vulnerability and precarity to children's legal subjectivities, US immigrant family detention and immigration law and enforcement policy. Immigration law is a blunt instrument that constructs children as apolitical and inert, while adult migrant subjects are deemed to be highly politicized (see also Ruddick, 2007a, 2007b). In these articles, feelings of risk and (in)security are embodied, contextual, multiscalar, and relational. Similarly, for undocumented women migrants moving from Mexico to the US, as told to Valencia (2017), their journeys are characterized by violence, risk and vulnerability, so much so that despite hostility, they feel safer living in the US. Gender geographies of precarity are compared from origins, during the journey, and in the new home. For queer migrants in Berlin, the interplay of sexism, racism, classism, islamophobia and homophobia fragments the identities of (previously identifying) Israeli-Jewish lesbians (Preser, 2016). Place and bodies are co-constructed through struggle and a queer relational commitment to bodies deemed most marginalized and grievable, beyond the category of lesbian.

Taking a different angle, a themed section of *Gender, Place and Culture* is dedicated to feminist interpretations of waiting for asylum-seekers, migrants and refugees (Conlon, 2011; Gray, 2011; Hyndman and Giles, 2011; Mountz, 2011; Schuster, 2011). People who have to wait (regardless of their gender) are feminized, constructed as passive and even 'authentically' vulnerable. Alternatively, those who are able to move are constructed as active, masculinized and more likely to be considered a threat to security and a drain on a country's resources (Hyndman and Giles, 2011). The binary is problematized in *Gender, Place and Culture*'s themed section, particularly in the contribution by Mountz (2011), who elaborates on the ambiguities of waiting, the ways waiting is actively experienced, and the activism that takes place when waiting in liminal spaces. These evocative accounts of waiting bring to the surface gendered suffering, and I extend Olsen's (2015) request that scholarship on waiting needs to be considered alongside feminist and queer geographies of urgency.

Young Canadian millennial women face precarious work conditions, often saying 'yes' to exploitative job tasks because of everyday inequalities and feelings of insecurity (Worth, 2016). McDowell et al. (2014) extend precarious geographies of employment research with a focus on young South Asian men and their economic and social exclusion. They investigate the outcomes of a labour market characterized by insecurity and disadvantaged working-class men (at the intersections of race, ethnicity and class) from minority communities. Young British men in low-paid service positions often carry out demeaning and precarious work (McDowell, 2005). Ironically, the emphasis on job creation and better wages reinforces some types of cisgendered identities plus feelings of nationalism within an inequitable social order that is structured on waged labour. On the other side of the globe, and the other side of economic

precarity, Gorman-Murray (2011) tracks the changing nature of masculinity and home in Sydney, Australia, post the global financial crisis. Professional, middle-class heterosexual men's emotional attachments to work and home are interrogated, showing men's shifting attachments to 'work' and 'home'. Home becomes a place of emotional wellbeing when work becomes insecure for these business professionals. These UK and Australian examples – brought side by side – show the unevenness of precarious geographies, with the former an illustration of young men's strategies to stay home to stay safe – emotionally and physically – in the face of overt discrimination and violence in the street, and the latter an example of a retreat to home spaces in order to rejuvenate. Applying Butler's (2004) framework of 'grievable lives', feminist and queer geographers not only seek to understand the way lives are made vulnerable, with some lives deemed 'more grievable' than others, but also to understand the unequal spread of vulnerability depending upon class, race, gender, sexuality, nationality and so on. Precarity, then, is not just located at the margins; rather, it is relational and has grown in the 'centre', making daily life increasingly insecure (see also Berlant, 2011).

Shifting, now, to precarious and insecure geographies at home, Kern (2010) asserts that new condominium developments in Toronto, Canada, help secure a gendered self in a revitalized city. Discursive constructions of women within geographies of fear and threat mean that women who move into the condominiums are paradoxically positioned as 'free' in the city yet a crucial part of patriarchal and capitalist power relations that structure contemporary gentrified urban life. 'House' and 'home' are a source of confusion and precariousness for homeless lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) youth in Kent, England (Tunåker, 2015). When forced out of precarious and unsafe heteronormative homes, young LGBT people 'disappear' as they move through the liminal spaces of shelters and friends' or other kins' homes. Tunåker (2015) pushes geographers and other housing scholars to consider the complexity of precarious homes for LGBT youth. This 'queer domicide' is further intensified when LGBTI populations are displaced and experience home loss in natural disasters (Gorman-Murray et al., 2014).

When faced with the aftermath of a natural disaster – hurricanes, tornados, tropical cyclones, earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, fires – LGBTI populations are missing from policy and research (Dominey-Howes et al., 2014). This call to 'queer disasters' takes into account the vulnerabilities, needs and resilience of LGBTI populations. LBGTI people need a voice in disaster management and recovery (Gorman-Murray et al., 2017); have specific shelter and housing needs (Gorman-Murray et al., 2014); and are vulnerable yet possess an array of capabilities for disaster impact reduction (Gaillard et al., 2017). This important scholarship builds on feminist geographical research that focuses on the intersections of embodied vulnerability and adaptive capacities in natural disaster situations (Hyndman, 2008; Reed and Christie, 2009; Seager, 2006). Katz (2008: 15) shows that in post-Katrina New Orleans the city's long-term disinvestment in social reproduction (such as health care, housing, infrastructure, education and social justice in general) exasperated 'corrosive inequalities around class, race, and gender'. This potent mix of inequalities contributed to the detrimental post-disaster outcomes for women and lone parents. It is clear which bodies are deemed more or less grievable than others post natural disasters.

Ontological insecurities constitute a themed section of the journal *Social and Cultural Geography*. Philo (2014: 287) asserts that emotional/affectual and psychoanalytic/therapeutic geographers have 'dispersed the human self', demonstrating that we are anything but whole, 'rather, fragmented into different, more-or-less connected regions . . . that may (or may not) impel the self to do things, to speak, to conduct

itself or take actions in its life-world'. Bondi (2014) – in the same themed section – uses autobiography to present a personal and subjective emotional geography of insecurity, with attention paid to intense pressure experienced in conditions of material security and privilege. Refugees' and asylum-seekers' feelings of stress and distress are discussed by Waite et al. (2014) and Noxolo (2014). The precarious position of refugees and asylum-seekers means that many are forced into certain types of employment with demeaning forms of impoverishment (see also Elwood et al., 2016; Waite et al., 2015). Noxolo (2014) introduces the concept of 'embodied securityscape' and exquisitely argues that asylum-seekers embody the in-between space of security-migration and security-development.

The conditions of knowledge production in universities prompts Peake and Mullings (2016) to consider the impact of precarity (as a signifying characteristic of neoliberal economies) and vulnerability for university populations. Emotional and mental distress is the 'new normal' for academics, professional staff and students. This too is differentiated by genders, race, ethnicity, and sexualities. The academy has long been constructed as a place for 'rational thought' supposedly free of 'emotional bodies'. Yet everyday sexism, homophobia, transphobia and racism – as well as our capacity to embrace continuous achievement – means that as feminist and queer geographers we are complicit in privileged yet risky places of knowledge production. Precarity in the academy highlights feminist and queer geographers' ethical responsibility of care and the need to rethink social relationality based on precarity (Peake, 2015). One way to do this is to take a more-than-representational approach to queertime, space and emotion in the academy, which is captured by McGlotten (2014: 483):

> He has a job, an office, and something like an upwardly mobile life, or at least one that is superficially distant from the savage precarity that governs the lives of so many. One misstep, though. Of course, he stands out as one of only a handful of faculty of color. There is scrutiny, expectations, and projections. He remembers to work a little harder 'just in case,' to watch out 'because white people are crazy' and 'you just never know.'

Universities have struggled to accommodate diverse embodied subjectivities due to the ongoing reproduction of masculinist, heteronormative, ableist, racist and minority world-centric discourses. These anxiety-inducing masculinist and ableist workplaces are discussed by Horton and Tucker (2012), who draw on the narratives of geographers who define themselves as disabled. The accounts illustrate how 'academic activism' (Gibson-Graham, 2008) is needed to challenge and open spaces of knowledge production to embodied pluralism. The International Geographical Union Commission on Gender and Geography (https://igugender.wixsite.com/igugender) is an example of a wide-reaching organization that supports the construction of feminist and queer knowledges both within and beyond Anglo-American racial, ablest, minority world hegemonies (Huang et al., 2017).

IV Conclusion

When reviewing publications for this report, I became aware of the multiple ways in which feminist and queer geographers use the concepts precarity, precariousness, vulnerability and insecurity. Precarity spins outwards to encompass an array of spaces and places, and this is not surprising, given that feminist and queer geographers have a deep commitment to positive social change. Precarity is directly linked to gender and sexual norms since those of us who do not live our genders and sexualities in 'intelligible' ways risk violence, discrimination, harassment and death.

Feminist and queer geographers who follow Butler's (2004) argument that grief and loss bring to the surface the fundamental relationality of social conditions are equipped to reveal gendered and sexualized social conditions. Indeed, common experiences of vulnerability, violence and emotion are the potential bases for community, connection, and alliance. Geographers are extending Butler's scholarship, illustrating social conditions as 'a dialectic of place-based and spatially extensive relations (capitalist, racial, gendered, representational, etc.)' (Elwood et al., 2016: 7).

In this commentary I have only been able to examine the extent to which feminist and queer geographers are developing scholarship in and around precarity and precariousness. What is clear is that precariousness is a function of spatial vulnerability, is differently distributed, and that unequal conditions are part of geopolitical governmentality of insecurity. By bringing together feminist and queer geographies of precarity, we are able to chart over time and space neglected people's lives.

A recurring theme throughout the feminist and queer precarious geography literature is the importance of foregrounding relationality, the multiscalar and a politics of embodied feeling. Understanding where and how it feels to be precarious becomes a resource to critique the conditions and experiences that divide 'us versus them.'

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